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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether proficient non-native speakers of English teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) modify their speech when addressing less proficient students, as has been observed among native teachers of English as a Second Language. Fourteen Peruvian teachers' classroom interactions were recorded. Comparisons were drawn between the levels of syntactic complexity in classroom and interview contexts and among three instructional levels. Minimal terminable units (T-units) were used to measure syntactic complexity. Results reveal that the speech directed to learners in the classroom was significantly less complex than the speech the teachers were capable of producing in another setting. Speech used at the highest and lowest levels of instruction was found to be significantly different in complexity. Implications and research limitations are discussed. A 14-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Can Foreigners Do "Foreigner Talk"?: A Study of the Linguistic Input Provided by Non-Native Teachers of EFL

ROBERT D. MILK

The tendency of native speakers of a language to modify their speech when addressing less-than-proficient non-native speakers has been well established. Previous studies have found this adjustment of linguistic input to occur in the classroom talk of native speakers of English teaching ESL. This study examines a related question: Do proficient *non-native* speakers of English teaching EFL exhibit similar linguistic accommodations when addressing students who are in the process of learning English as have been observed among native ESL teachers? Fourteen Peruvian EFL teachers were tape recorded during 60-90 minutes of classroom interaction with their students. In order to establish the non-native teachers' capacity to produce more complex language than what was produced in the classroom, comparisons were drawn between their levels of syntactic complexity in classroom and interview contexts. In order to determine if the teachers' classroom speech was adjusted to match their listener's level of proficiency, comparisons were drawn among the aggregate data for three broadly defined instructional levels. T-units were used as an index of syntactic complexity. The comparison between classroom and interview samples revealed that the speech addressed to learners in the classroom was significantly less complex than what the teachers were capable of producing in another setting (such as the interview). A comparison between the teachers' classroom speech at the highest and lowest levels of instruction indicated that their speech at the lower level was significantly less complex than at the higher level. The implications of this study, as well as important limitations, are discussed.

The role played by linguistic input in the second language acquisition process has generated a fair amount of discussion in recent years, as researchers seek to identify important variables in this process. For a number of years, this question was not

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considered an interesting one by many linguists who, operating from a Chomskyan perspective, rejected the notion that input based on native speakers' performance (which is replete with unsystematic errors) could possibly play an important role in aiding learners acquire competence (i.e., knowledge of the underlying structure of the target language). Research analyzing the speech of native speakers addressing learners (be they young children acquiring the first language or other learners of all ages struggling with a second language) has, however, forced us to re-examine the potential significance of input as a variable in the acquisition process.

Ferguson (1971, 1975) provided important background work for serious consideration of this issue through his identification and description of "simplified registers", which he defined as "more-or-less conventionalized varieties of language used by members of a speech community to address people whose knowledge of the language of the community is felt to be less than normal" (Ferguson & DeBose, 1977, p.100). Possible "real-world" manifestations of this variety include "baby talk" ("the variety of language that is regarded by a speech community as primarily appropriate for addressing young children") and "foreigner talk" ("the variety of language regarded as primarily appropriate for addressing foreigners") (Ferguson & DeBose, 1977, pp.102-103).

Documentation of the phenomena identified by Ferguson has been ample. Studies focusing on "motherese" have found the language used in communicating with young children to be systematically modified in ways that promote communication (Snow, 1977; Snow & Ferguson, 1977; DePaulo & Bonvillian, 1978; Gleason & Weintraub, 1978). In a similar fashion, speech addressed by native speakers towards less-than-proficient non-native speakers exhibits many features that appear to aid comprehension. These defining characteristics for simplified registers have been identified at various levels of language and include such features as clear enunciation, slower rate of speech, more concrete lexicon, and less complex syntactic structures (Hatch, 1983). In addition, certain processes operating in a global fashion across all levels have been identified and described in terms of their potential functional contribution towards enhancing communication. Two examples provided by Ferguson and DeBose (1977) are "simplifying", which by supplying material that is normally omitted and separating elements that are normally fused, serves to add redundancy to the message. Although a functional analysis of "motherese" and "foreigner talk" reveals important differences

(Freed, 1980), the structural similarities between these two registers would seem to suggest that *listener characteristics* can serve at least in some contexts, to *elicit modified language* from native speakers. Whether or not this process is unique to *native* speakers of a language is the primary question motivating this study.

For researchers interested in language teaching, the developing evidence related to the existence of "simplified registers" poses some interesting questions. Do teachers, upon addressing their students in a second or foreign language classroom, systematically modify their speech in a way that makes it more comprehensible? If so, does this "comprehensible input" provided by native teachers in a more or less unconscious manner as a response to the proficiency level of their students, serve an important function in the second language acquisition process (Krashen, 1982)?

Empirical evidence supporting the existence of a simplified register characteristic of foreign language classrooms is provided by Henzl (1974), who defines this register in terms of modified speech as found in foreigner talk and baby talk, combined with elements of "teacher talk" -- i.e., the language that is characteristic of classroom instruction (Cazden, 1979). Further research investigating the hypothesis that teachers' classroom language is adjusted to reflect their learners' level of proficiency was undertaken by Gaies (1977). This study examined syntactic features of the classroom speech of native ESL teachers, finding that their classroom speech was syntactically less complex on a number of variables than their speech out of the classroom. Gaies also compared the teachers' classroom speech at different levels of instruction, and found that "the subjects' classroom language was remarkably fine-tuned to their learners' level of proficiency"; further, Gaies argued that these findings lend "empirical support to the notion that classroom input, like caretaker speech, may facilitate acquisition" (Gaies, 1983, p.207).

The common thread underlying all of the research referred to here is the finding that native speakers appear to intuitively modify their speech when addressing less-than-proficient non-native speakers. The reasons for this common finding across such widely divergent interaction settings are not fully understood, although it might be speculated that the ability to adapt one's level of speech to accommodate the perceived linguistic capabilities of the addressee is part of a native speaker's communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). It is interesting to note that most of the research reported on simplified registers involves native speakers of the target language (a notable exception is Gaies' research study (1977),

which included three non-native ESL teachers in the sample). One interesting question that has not yet been systematically explored is to what extent modifications similar to those found in the speech of native speakers (NS) are also exhibited by proficient non-native speakers (NNS) when addressing less proficient NNS. This question has important practical implications for the teaching of English in areas of the world where, because of the absence of significant numbers of native speakers, most of the teaching is done by NNS of the language. In these areas, the possibility of "acquiring" a second language (following Krashen, 1982) within a classroom context is heavily dependent on the nature of the input provided by the teacher.

The data presented in this study, therefore, address the broad question of whether the tendency to use foreigner talk is unique to native speakers of a language. However, the scope of the study was quite narrow, focusing on only one level of language (syntax), and on only one aspect of syntax (syntactic complexity). In the absence of previous studies examining the linguistic input provided by NNS in teaching situations, it seemed reasonable to narrowly define the scope of the study. Moreover, because a critical intervening variable in studies dealing with the speech of NNS is their level of proficiency in the second language, it was decided that focusing on syntactic complexity would permit a rather straightforward comparison to be made with baseline data gathered outside the classroom. Such a comparison was needed in this study in order to determine if NNS teachers, when interacting with learners in class are modifying the level of syntactic complexity of the input they provide, or if their simplified syntax merely reflected their less-than-native proficiency in the language.

This study, therefore, examined one of the aspects of the linguistic input provided by NNS teaching English in an EFL context. The specific research question addressed was whether non-native teachers of EFL exhibit the same tendency as NS teachers in adjusting their syntactic complexity when addressing learners in the classroom.

Subjects

Fourteen non-native EFL teachers at two major English-teaching centers in Lima, Peru whose native language was Spanish were selected as subjects for this study. Six of the teachers had either lived or travelled in an English-speaking country at some point in

their career. The teachers' English oral language proficiencies were determined by analyzing taped interview data. Subjects' Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) estimates were obtained by asking an official rater for the Texas Language Proficiency Interview System (developed by Educational Testing Service) to rate the teachers' English oral language proficiency, based on taped interview samples. LPI scores ranged from "minimal professional competence" to "near-native" proficiency (see Table 1). Despite occasional lapses in grammar and vocabulary, and varying degrees of mastery of idiomatic English, all of the teachers had a sound mastery of the English syntactic and phonological systems, and possessed a relatively high degree of fluency in the language.

Table 1: LPI Scores for Participating Teachers (N = 14)

Score	Descriptor	Teachers	Number
3	Minimum professional proficiency	E,M	2
3+	Professional proficiency	K	1
4	Distinguished proficiency	A,B, D, G, H, L, N, P	8
4+	Near-native proficiency	C, F, J	3

The students in the centers had all completed secondary school, and typically ranged in age from 18 to 35. A significant number (although not a majority) of the participants were university students, or had completed some university study. Classes at varying instructional levels were selected for participation in the study. Table 2 details the levels for the 14 classes that were tape recorded.

Table 2: Instructional Level of Participating Classrooms (N = 14)

Level	Total Cumulative Hours of English Instruction	Number of Classrooms
Advanced Beginner	90 - 150	6
Low Intermediate	200 - 275	5
High Intermediate	325 - 450	3

Procedures

A regular classroom teaching event of each of the fourteen subjects was tape-recorded. Recordings vary in length from 55-65

minutes, and I was present in the classroom during all recordings as a non-participant observer. In order to allay anxieties, a special effort was made to be visibly present around the center for several weeks prior to initiating the recordings. Both students and teacher understood that I was involved in a research project, and that it was non-evaluative in nature.

Immediately following each classroom recording session, I conducted an informal 15-20 minute taped interview with the teacher. The interviews focused on a number of topics, ranging from personal matters (including hobbies, travel, and family background) to professional topics (for example, curriculum preferences and teaching philosophy). The taped interviews were obtained in order to determine the teachers' English proficiency outside of the classroom setting, as well as to provide baseline data from which to compare the teachers' classroom talk.

Analysis

Transcripts were obtained of both the taped classroom lessons and the teacher interviews. Portions of the transcripts were then submitted to linguistic analysis focusing on the teachers' recorded speech in the two contexts (classroom and interview). Two measures of syntactic complexity were used, both based on the T-unit: (a) mean length of T-units, and (b) ratio of complex ones to all T-units. T-unit is defined here as the "minimal terminable unit", consisting of "one main clause with the subordinate clauses attached to it" (Hunt, 1965, p.20). The usual conventions were followed in calculating "mean length of T-unit": all words in independent clause and related dependent clauses or proportional phrases were counted (O'Donnell et al., 1967; Loban, 1976; Ramirez, 1974; Larsen-Freeman, 1978; McGroarty, 1981). For the second measure, a complex T-unit was defined as containing one or more dependent clauses (McGroarty, 1981). This additional measure was deemed useful because it captures a dimension of syntactic complexity not explicitly present in the first measure.

Although T-unit analysis has been used in both first and second language research as an indicator of syntactic complexity, its use has been questioned on several grounds. Gaies (1980) summarizes some of these criticisms: its failure to take into account "appropriateness"; its failure to discriminate among subjects with a low proficiency when used as an index of second language

development; and, its failure to adjust for distorting factors such as excessive coordination within a sentence.

However, the limitations associated with the T-unit measure noted above relate specifically to its use as an index of second language development (or of "syntactic maturity")--it does not appear to discriminate well among second language speakers at adjacent skill levels (although it does discriminate low and high proficiency levels). Its use in this study is not for the purpose of studying language development, but for the purpose of determining if non-native ESL teachers adjust the complexity of their speech when addressing less-than-proficient learners. The analysis, therefore, is focused not on a comparison among second language speakers at different proficiency levels, but, rather, on a comparison of utterances in different contexts for *the same speakers*. Since a major concern of this study is to determine if the non-native teachers are providing English input that is modified sufficiently for it to be processed by incipient English speakers, then use of a measure which reflects in some way the amount of information that has been incorporated and consolidated "into a single grammatically related unit" (Gaies, 1980, p.58) seemed justified.

The sample of classroom teacher talk chosen for T-unit analysis consisted of the first 50 teacher utterances selected in sequential order from those portions of the lesson involving meaningful student-teacher exchanges (i.e., excluding portions involving drill work, repetitions, or reading). For the purposes of this analysis, utterance was defined as "a meaningful unit of speech, usually bounded by a pause of one second or more" (Cherry, 1978). The sample selected from the interview for analysis consisted of the first 50 utterances occurring once the substantive part of the interview had been initiated (i.e., excluding initial pleasantries and "small talk").

Results

The first question that needs to be addressed is whether or not the teachers' classroom sample represents speech that is less complex than what they are capable of producing in other settings. This is an important question since the subjects in question are non-native speakers of English, and we have no way of knowing whether relatively simple classroom talk might not be due to their less-than-native proficiency in English. In this study, by comparing their classroom sample with the interview sample, it could be

established whether or not they were in fact capable of producing more complex speech than what appeared in the classroom sample. The intention in making this comparison between classroom and interview samples was primarily to establish the ability of the teachers to produce more complex utterances than what they produced in class. However, this comparison should not be used to argue that the teachers are necessarily modifying their speech to accommodate to the learners' needs, since the simplification could be attributed to other factors such as differences in social context between a teaching and an interview setting. If one were to establish whether these non-native teachers were really modifying input to meet learner needs, it would be more appropriate to make comparisons between teacher talk at different levels of instruction (for example, between beginning and advanced levels). This latter comparison, made within the same basic setting (the classroom), eliminates "social context" as a confounding variable in accounting for input simplification.

Table 3: Mean Length of T-unit for Classroom and Interview Samples

Teacher	LPI Level	Classroom	Interview	t-value
A	4	7.06	13.24	6.72***
B	4	5.54	9.22	5.58***
C	4+	7.18	10.58	3.70***
D	4	5.70	9.42	5.10***
E	3	7.28	9.92	3.00**
F	4+	6.16	10.38	4.35***
G	4	6.72	7.98	1.91
H	4	7.70	9.40	2.05*
J	4+	6.70	11.66	6.12***
K	3+	7.26	8.42	1.51
L	4	6.84	7.94	1.72
M	3	7.76	7.59	.20
N	4	7.82	10.46	2.72**
P	4	8.34	10.82	2.85**
Group Mean		7.00	9.79	5.92***
*p ≤ .05	**p ≤ .01	***p ≤ .001		

The mean length of T-unit for teacher utterances in the two settings (classroom and interview) is reported in Table 3. A two-tailed t-test for two independent samples was conducted in order to determine the level of statistical significance for the difference found

in the speech of these two settings. The results showed clear differences between the teachers' mean length of T-unit in the classroom and interview settings. Thirteen out of the 14 teachers had larger T-unit lengths in their interview samples than in the classrooms. The difference between the group means for the two samples was significant at the .01 level. The differences obtained for classroom vs. interview samples were significant at the .01 level for nine of the teachers. It is interesting to note that two of the instances of nonsignificant differences involved teachers whose LPI score was below 4 (teachers K and M).

Table 4: Complex T-units in Classroom and Interview Settings (N = 14)

Number of Complex T-Units			Ratio of Complex T-Units/All T-Units		
Teacher	Class	Interview	Class	Interview	Ratio of Complex T-Units in Interview vs. Class
A	6	17	.12	.34	2.83
B	1	14	.02	.28	14.00
C	6	22	.12	.44	3.67
D	8	16	.16	.32	2.00
E	11	9	.22	.18	.82
F	6	13	.12	.26	2.17
G	6	2	.12	.04	.33
H	10	19	.20	.38	1.90
J	8	25	.16	.50	3.13
K	13	13	.26	.26	1.00
L	2	6	.04	.12	3.00
M	9	16	.18	.32	1.78
N	12	14	.24	.28	1.17
P	9	19	.18	.38	2.11
Total	107	205			
Mean Ratio			.15*	.29*	1.92
Note: The sample for each setting consists of 50 T-units * $p \leq .01$ ($t = 3.63$)					

Table 4 reports the ratio of complex ones to all T-units for utterances in the two settings. The trend is similar to that observed in Table 3, with eleven of the teachers performing a greater number of complex

T-units during the interview. In ten cases, there were at least 50% more complex T-units in the interview sample than in the classroom sample. Having established that the classroom speech of the teachers is simpler than what they are capable of producing in a non-instructional context, the next question is whether they adjust their speech to match the students' proficiency at different instructional levels (i.e., beginner vs. advanced). The ideal way to make this comparison is to examine the data for the *same* teacher at different instructional levels (e.g., Teacher A's speech in a beginning class vs. an advanced class).

Because very few of the teachers who taught beginning classes taught advanced classes, this comparison could not be made, leaving comparison of group means across different instructional levels as the only alternative for addressing this second question. Consequently, in order to determine if differences in syntactic complexity of the classroom input exist as students become more advanced in their instructional level, a comparison was made between the aggregate data for each of the three levels (Table 5). The data for mean length of T-unit by instructional level demonstrate a clear trend in the expected direction, with the samples from the more elementary classrooms showing smaller mean T-unit lengths than the samples from the more advanced classrooms. A one-way Analysis of Variance for the three levels, however, indicated that the differences among them were not significant.

Table 5: Mean Length of T-unit in Classroom Samples by Instructional Level (N = 14)

Level	Number	Average LPI Score	Mean Words/T-Unit
Advanced Beginner (Teachers A-F)	6	4	6.48
Low Intermediate (Teachers G-L)	5	4	7.04
High Intermediate (teachers M-P)	3	4	7.97
F(2,11) = 1.94, n.s.			

In order to determine if the differences obtained between the *highest* and *lowest* instructional levels were statistically significant, a *post hoc* comparison was made between the mean words/T-unit

for the high intermediate classes vs. those for the advanced beginners (Table 6).

Table 6: Mean Length of T-unit of Lowest vs. Highest Instructional Levels (N = 9)

Level	Number	Mean Words/T-Unit
Lowest	6	6.48*
Highest	3	7.97*
* $P \leq .02$, $t = 3.10$		

The differences between these two levels (highest vs. lowest) did prove to be statistically significant ($t = 3.10$, $p \leq .02$). In a similar fashion, aggregate means for the number of complex T-units in the classroom samples (Table 7) show a clear proportionate increase as the instructional level rises (.13 ratio for advanced beginners vs. .20 for high intermediates), although these results are not statistically significant.

Table 7: Complex T-units in Classroom Samples by Instructional Level

Level	N	Number of Complex T-Units	All T-Units	Ratio of Complex/ All T-Units
Advanced Beginner	6	38	300	0.13
Low Intermediate	5	39	250	0.16
High Intermediate	3	30	150	0.20

A comparison between the mean number of complex T-units per 50 utterances for the Advanced Beginners (6.33) vs. the High Intermediates (10.00) yielded a t value of 1.78, which is not significant at $p \leq .05$.

Discussion

Previous studies examining teacher talk in second language classrooms suggest that native teachers modify their speech when addressing learners, thus providing linguistic input that presumably might be more easily processed by their students. This study

considered the question of whether non-native teachers of EFL manifest similar linguistic accommodations when addressing their students in the classroom. The data obtained from these classroom and interview contexts clearly suggested that the participating non-native teachers of EFL did modify their speech in a fairly systematic way when addressing students. Moreover, comparisons of input at three different instructional levels suggested that these teachers, as a group, are quite adept at adjusting the complexity of their classroom language to match the processing capabilities of their learners. Because all of the teachers in this study spoke English at a moderate to moderately high level of proficiency, it is not possible to determine whether non-native speakers at lower proficiency levels exhibit similar capabilities in adjusting their speech to accommodate learners' needs, nor is it possible to speculate from this study whether there might be a certain "threshold" level of proficiency in a second language below which appropriate accommodating behavior is not exhibited on a consistent basis. But it does seem possible to argue, based on these data, that proficient non-native teachers of EFL intuitively adjust the complexity of their speech to accommodate the linguistic needs of their students. In a series of books and articles, Krashen (1981, 1982) presented an hypothesis that acquisition of a second language in a classroom setting may depend, in large part, on the student being exposed to large amounts of input at an appropriate level of complexity. Although the connection between an appropriate level of complexity in classroom input and more successful learning outcomes is still in need of further verification, the hypothesis that appropriate linguistic input can be more easily processed by students and can thus facilitate acquisition is an extremely appealing one.

The data presented in this study suggesting that non-native teachers modify the complexity of their speech when addressing learners within the classroom provide reassuring preliminary evidence that they may, despite possessing "accents" and occasional syntactic deviations, be effective "acquisition facilitators", and, thus, potentially effective second language teachers.

There are some important limitations in this study. The design of the study, as originally conceptualized, called for comparisons *for the same teacher* across different instructional levels. Practical considerations imposed by the context in which the data were collected prohibited the implementation of this design. As a result, comparisons across instructional levels had to be made through the means of aggregate data of the teachers at each of the three levels

represented by the participants. This is clearly less than ideal, given individual differences in language use and teaching style, as well as language proficiency. Indeed, it is probably safe to assume that the non-significance of the results obtained in Table 5 is due in part to the high degree of within-group variance generated by differences among individual teachers within each of the instructional levels.

A second limitation of this study is that it examines solely the complexity of the teachers' utterances, and does not consider the specific functions served by the utterances in facilitating the acquisition process (e.g., clarifying, expanding, repeating, etc.). Indeed, this is the limitation shared by all studies that focus on linguistic input without examining "interaction". Long (1981) develops a convincing argument that modifications in interaction offer a more parsimonious explanation for the facilitative role of classroom language in second language acquisition than simply the modification of input. If Long is correct, then future studies of the classroom speech of non-native second language teachers should examine the functions of teacher utterances, particularly *vis a vis* the facilitative effect of modified interaction.

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